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Hill Hurt By Leaks On CIA Reform Plans Seen Shifting To White House

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Congressional efforts to legislate new charters and draw tighter reins of oversight on the U.S. intelligence community have bogged down disastrously in a show of division and political ineptitude on Capitol Hill.

This is the verdict of administration officials and congressional leaders of the campaign to reform the intelligence agencies.

"The issue has become how to keep secrets rather than how to preserve freedom," Sen. Frank Church (D-Idaho), chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, confessed despondently in a recent interview.

White House officials, meanwhile, now express confidence that President Ford rather than Congress will be the architect of any renovations in the structure of the Central Intelligence Agency, which has been at the center of a year and a half of controversy stemming from press and congressional disclosures of unsavory and sometimes illegal acts.

"We are not going to have change simply for the sake of change — something I wouldn't have said to you six months ago," one White House official observed of the changing political mood.

Another administration official, who has helped to guide CIA officials through the past year's ordeal, summed matters up this way: "What has the past year and a half of investigation wrought? Not much."

This assessment is underlined by the chaotic state of affairs on Capitol Hill over legislative efforts to reorganize Congress for the task of performing a stronger oversight role upon the intelligence community.

All indications point, in fact, to the prospect that whatever oversight system emerges from the current struggle will be weaker than the one already in force, which subjects the CIA to the attentions of six separate committees.

Congressional initiatives of the past few weeks have been directed more toward the punishment of congressional members and staff personnel who leak intelligence secrets than at the original goal of adding legislative restraint to the free-swinging use of the intelligence agencies by presidents.

For example, Sen. Walter Huddleston (D-Ky.), a member of Church's committee, last week called for curbs on the cherished congressional prerogative of free speech and debate, in the overriding interest of secrecy.

"I have at times had the feeling that we are riding a runaway horse — with information galloping forth and no one able to pull in the reins," he said in proposing restrictions such as fines, end of access by members to classified information, and even censure or expulsion.

Church, however, in his unconcealed frustration at the turn of events, said that "if Congress permits itself to be gagged it ought to forfeit its oversight function."

His own committee was unable to agree on a bill to establish a permanent intelligence committee. Even the majority of members who joined Church in one proposal was not in agreement on key points such as whether the new oversight committee would have the right on its own initiative to disclose intelligence information — a right that Church successfully asserted late last year in releasing the report on assassinations.

On the House side the disarray is even deeper in the aftermath of a series of collisions between the feisty chairman of the House intelligence committee, Rep. Otis B. Pike (D-N.Y.), and the administration. This

culminated late last month in an overwhelming rebuke by the House to the New York congressman in a vote that temporarily kept secret the contents of the committee's final report.

The present altered state of the intelligence reform process, according to congressional and administration sources, arose primarily from two specific events and the inability of Congress to handle them:

— The assassination last Dec. 23 of the CIA's Athens chief of station, Richard S. Welch, in a terrorist ambush at his home. Former CIA Director William E. Colby acknowledged in a recent interview that Welch's murder was the "single most crucial" event in changing the climate of opinion toward the agency.

The administration's open orchestration of the Welch tragedy tended to implicate all critics of the agency, including the congressional investigating committees. "There was no leak from our committee," Church insists, "only the administration's innuendos, which the press repeated."

The massive unauthorized disclosures of portions of the Pike committee report were described as a "disaster" even by its staff director, A. Searle Field.

Administration spokesmen lost no time decrying the leaks as examples of how Congress could not be trusted with national intelligence secrets.

Despite the year of huffing and puffing by congressional committees, the prospects are that it will be the administration, with a sense of public opinion running its way, which will define the future boundaries of intelligence activity.

This will be done in a national intelligence message by President Ford within the next 10 days, and a series of private recodifications of the charters for each of the principle intelligence agencies.

White House reorganization blueprints already in draft form call for a detailed code of accountability within the Executive Branch and a method of bringing "errors" to the surface, according to officials.